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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

25 July 1980

MEMORANDUM

Iran: US Non-Lethal Military Options [REDACTED]

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Summary

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The US has a range of non-lethal options available to intensify pressure on Iran.

--Increase naval activity in the vicinity of Iran.

--Move additional troops or aircraft into the Middle East.

--Initiate reconnaissance overflights of Iran.

--Mine or blockade Iranian ports.

In combination with these military actions the US could step up its diplomatic moves to isolate Iran. [REDACTED]

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We do not believe that any of these measures would lead to the release of the US hostages. Short of obtaining this objective, each of these measures has the disadvantage of again underlining US helplessness in dealing with the hostages. At this point, any action against Iran will be measured by other countries in terms of its success in freeing the hostages, no matter what the actual US objective. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] of the Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis and coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East South Asia. Questions and comments may be addressed to Chief, Near East South Asia Division, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Increased naval, troop or air activity in the region short of a blockade or mining would not have much impact in Tehran and would be viewed as an attempt to improve President Carter's domestic standing. [REDACTED]

High altitude reconnaissance flights over Iran or flights along the coast would have little impact in Tehran--the Iranians already believe the US is engaged in a major espionage campaign designed to bring down the Khomeini regime. Moderate Arab governments and some West European allies would express concern that the US was behaving recklessly and inviting a Soviet response. [REDACTED]

Blockading or mining Iranian harbors would strengthen the hardliners who oppose any compromise with the US. Khomeini would call for Muslim protests against the US, and Iranian leftists would urge cooperation with Moscow. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The Iranian opposition would applaud a show of US resolve toward Iran. The exiles might interpret such actions as a sign the US would back them with its own forces. [REDACTED]

The Impact in Tehran

The US would gain relatively few immediate benefits from the use of non-lethal options. Renewed military pressure through the ostentatious movement of US forces or the beginning of overflights would show continued US concern but would be unlikely to have significant impact on the Iranian regime. Even such relatively drastic measures as a naval blockade or mining would almost certainly not lead to release of the hostages or the collapse of the Khomeini regime; indeed the country would probably draw closer together in the face of the US threat, at least for several months:

--Khomeini would seek to exploit US moves to stir anti-American and anti-Western sentiment. In the past, he has responded to pressure tactics by becoming even more inflexible and rigid.

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[REDACTED]

--Tehran would seek to mobilize Islamic opinion against the US. In response to a blockade or mining, Tehran radio would call for Muslims--especially Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states--to strike at US installations and oil facilities. The government would probably call for a meeting of the Islamic Conference and press for strong anti-US resolutions.

--The militants might again press for trials of the hostages, but we doubt that they would execute any hostages unless Iranians were killed by US forces.

--In the event of a blockade or mining, President Bani-Sadr and members of the government inclined to support a negotiated end to the crisis would adopt a harder line against the US. The hardline clerics and their supporters would try to manipulate the US move to weaken the moderates and further their own political ambitions.

--The Iranians might accept limited Soviet military aid such as minesweepers and would probably accept and publicize Soviet offers to provide economic assistance.

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[REDACTED]

Iranian leftists, in particular the Tudeh Party, would urge that Tehran turn to the USSR for aid against the US, but Khomeini and other senior Iranian leaders would not want to align Iran too closely with Moscow.

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[REDACTED]

We do not rule out the possibility that the Iranians might challenge US military moves with naval or air forces. Tehran's primary objective would be to impress world opinion rather than to gain military advantages. [REDACTED]

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The reaction of radical Arabs (Libya, Syria, Algeria, South Yemen, and the PLO) to low-key US actions would be hostile but probably remain pro forma. Propaganda attacks would be made on any Arab states that cooperated with the US. [REDACTED]

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A US blockade of Iran would provoke a strenuous reaction. The radical states would organize anti-US demonstrations against US Embassies which could lead to similar actions in moderate Islamic states. Libya would undoubtedly attempt to organize some kind of joint use of the oil weapon. The Libyans probably would fail to obtain an Arab consensus, although their prospects for success would grow if the crisis dragged on. The radical oil producers might be inclined, however, to announce a reduction in oil production, which would strengthen prices softened by the current oil "glut", but which could be billed as a political move. [REDACTED]

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Given Iraq's problems with Tehran, Baghdad probably would not react strongly to US moves such as reconnaissance flights, although some propaganda response would be needed to maintain Iraq's image as a leading opponent of superpower meddling. Dispatch of additional US warships to the Gulf would produce stronger rhetoric but few direct actions against US interests. The budding political dialogue with the US would slow. Iraq would see US action against Iran as a troublesome gesture threatening to increase both superpower's presence in the area. [REDACTED]

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We doubt that Iraq could remain passive to a US blockade. Iraq's options are largely limited to diplomacy and propaganda. Specific responses might include shelving of the dialogue with the US and organizing more aggressive opposition to US-Omani military cooperation. An Iraqi military reaction is likely only if Iraq's seaborne access to the Gulf from Basrah--its primary port--is blocked by US action in the Shatt al-Arab. [REDACTED]

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